

*Hello! My name is Nick Foreman. I'm a sophomore at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. I'm majoring in Human Physiology, the science of the different processes in the body. I love applying my physiology classes to running, where physiology is pushed to the extreme and we get to see what people can do. Outside of my classes, I'm also part of Lutheran Campus Ministries or LCM. I grew up in a Lutheran church, so LCM has been a great way to continue developing my faith. I'm grateful for the opportunity to preach here today and for your ongoing support of LCM.*

As a young child, I was involved in several of my church's musicals. Frequently, these stories focused on parables, because they're usually easy to digest and deliver using a cast of fourth fifth and sixth graders. So when I read the heading "Parable of the Talents", I was excited. It can't be that tough of a story, right? It's just one big metaphor. Step 1, find something uplifting, Step 2, find Jesus, Step 3, tie them together. Super easy.

But, I was surprised when I read the passage. Jesus wasn't easy to find, and the parable ends with a man being tossed into the darkness. Notably, this passage is Jesus' final teaching in Matthew? If you had one shot to give the world a message for thousands of years, what would you choose to say?

Whatever it is, you wouldn't want it tossed aside. You would make it memorable and force people to think. That's the passage we get to wrestle with today. However, being important doesn't necessarily make it easier to process. It features a man with an illegitimate fortune – earned by reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he did not scatter seed. Our passage for today ends by saying more will be given to those who have plenty. This is a spit in the face to the abundant biblical passages preaching benevolence and support for those less fortunate. And to cap it all off, there's the whole weeping and gnashing of teeth. Clearly, this passage is neither lighthearted nor crystal clear, and its intent is not obvious at first glance.

*The motto of LCM is “Be curious. Be real. Be community.” At Pause, our weekly Wednesday night worship service, Pastor Kate sets aside time to discuss what stands out to us from the scripture read to us and what questions we still have. This welcoming yet questioning environment is one of my favorite parts about LCM. I encourage you to be open to my questioning of this passage. It’s different than what you might’ve heard – the master is not Jesus, the servant is not lazy, and faith to the master isn’t the goal of this parable.*

The wealth-driven master featured today is decidedly not a representation of Jesus. He calls his servant wicked and slothful. He follows by admitting that his fortune was illegitimately earned.

He later blames the third servant for not investing and at least earning interest. This man is clearly motivated by material possessions: money, financial status, and abundant wealth.

You may be wondering where this money is found in a parable about “talents”. When you hear the word talent, you may think of athletes with incredible skill or musicians with beautiful voices.

It's common to hear sermons calling people to use their singing, speaking, or other talents to spread the gospel. These are important. Using this passage to deliver that message would be misinterpreting it. In this text, a "talent" has financial value. There is some dissension among scholars as to what it exactly represents. Most agree a talent is at least a year's wage and may be up to 20 years pay. However, they all agree it was of monetary value, not the intangible type of talent. With this in mind, consider how much these servants had been given – it was a lot!

Yet the master still expected his servants to return with more.

The master continues, saying everyone who already has will receive more and those with little will have nothing. Out of all the verses within this passage, this is the one that really stuck out to me. It seemingly defies all that I was told growing up, and I suspect it strikes a similar chord in many of you. If we all lived by this verse, the rich would just get richer and the poor would just get poorer. I struggle to believe that's what Jesus wanted for our world. This master, an advocate of sorts for the rich getting richer, directly contrasts the one we all want to know, the washer of feet and friend of the outcasts. The passage immediately following our gospel today explicitly describes the Son of Man as one who provides.

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink” are passages familiar to many of you. It ends saying “Truly I say to you, as you did it to one who is a member of my family, you did it to me.” This description of Jesus echoes the descriptions common throughout the New Testament – a man of kindness, hope, and love, not a man interested in growing his wealth and casting away his servant. Also in the Book of Matthew, Jesus delivers his sermon on the mount, blessing “the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” He goes on to bless those who mourn, hunger, and thirst, assuring they will all be provided for. This does not sound like a man who encourages taking from those who have nothing and giving to those who already have plenty.

These prominent themes of generosity seen throughout the Book of Matthew, both in the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, confidently dispel any notion that the greedy master in our passage today could be Jesus. He was a man of humble beginnings, not a man concerned with taking from the poor to provide for the rich. This leaves an important but challenging question: where do we find Jesus in this passage?

I found myself playing “Hide and Go Seek with Jesus” in passage filled with greed, frustration, and the weeping and gnashing of teeth – not an easy find to say the least. I went through the mental checklist of places he could be. The master had already been decisively eliminated. The first and second servants just blindly followed their master’s wishes, and that didn’t seem right to me – blind following is just following, not faith. This left me with the third servant, who I eventually realized was exactly where Jesus would be found in this troublesome story.

This servant was afraid of what would happen to him when given such a large amount of illegitimately earned wealth. The master describes him as lazy. Calling him lazy does a disservice to his admirable bravery to oppose an unjust regime. This servant is exactly who Jesus would support – someone who was afraid but stuck with what they believed in. Parallel this with our world today. A wealthy figure advocating for the accumulation of more wealth – certainly not unheard of. A handful of people just going through the motions, neither supporting nor opposing this uneven distribution of resources. And then the third servant, afraid and ultimately alone, forced to hide the master's money in the ground. This fear and outer darkness is where we find Jesus. He is out in the darkness, standing alongside the man who refused to participate in his master's unjust dealings.

As you go out this week, be curious. Be real with your thoughts on this difficult passage.

It's clearly an important one – it's part of Jesus' last teaching session in Matthew. It's not an easy one to read either – there aren't any verses to hang on the mantelpiece. Weeping and gnashing of teeth isn't a warm, cozy welcome to display at the door. Even more so, the passage features some troubling characters, making Jesus' presence not immediately obvious. Think about where you are filled with that presence in your fearful times. When you feel that you've been tossed into the outer darkness, wherever that is for you, remember that Jesus is there with you. Just as he would be with the third servant in the parable. Jesus will not leave you alone.